

Swainson's Thrush

Catharus ustulatus

More likely to be heard than seen, Swainson's Thrushes enliven summer mornings and evenings with their upward-spiraling, flutelike songs. During fall and spring migration, their soft, bell-like overhead "peeps" may be mistaken for the calls of frogs. These largely arboreal foragers pluck berries, glean bugs from leaves, or perch on branches and stumps. They also bound across the forest floor to catch insect prey. They breed in the north and the mountainous West, but they become very widespread during migration.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

Swainson's Thrushes are medium-sized thrushes—slim songbirds with round heads and short, straight bills. Their fairly long wings and medium-length tail can make the back half of the bird appear long.

Color Pattern

These medium-brown birds with pale underparts have spotted chests and large buffy eyerings that extend in front of the eye, creating "spectacles." The whitish throat is bordered on each side with a dark brown stripe. Swainson's Thrushes breeding on the Pacific slope of the U.S. and Canada have warmer brown upperparts.

Behavior

Swainson's Thrushes are shy but vocal birds that skulk in the shadows of their generally dark forest-interior habitat. They forage for insects and other arthropods on or near the ground. On migration, particularly in fall, they also eat small fruits such as wild cherries and Virginia creeper.

Habitat

This is a forest bird, rarely found far from closed-canopy forest. Breeding habitat is a mix of deciduous and coniferous forest (though sometimes includes pure deciduous forest). In the Rocky Mountains and in Pacific states, look for them in dense alder thickets along streams running through coniferous forest.



Cool Facts

- The "russet-backed" Pacific population has more reddish plumage and a slightly different song than the "olive-backed" birds in the rest of the range. The russet-backed birds winter in Central America while the olive-backed ones winter in South America.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 6.3 - 7.5 inches
- Wingspan - 11.4 - 12.2 inches
- Weight - 0.8 - 1.6 ounces